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U.S. Sued For Data On Vatican Catholic Weekly Seeks Details of Contacts by FBI

By Marjorie Hyer

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An independent, liberal Catholic weekly filed suit in U.S. District Court here this week in an effort to force the Justice Department to release details of the FBI's contacts with the Vatican from 1957 to 1977.

The National Catholic Reporter had filed a routine Freedom of Information request for such material in November 1977. Eight months later, FBI responded, in a multiple-choice form letter, that its Vatican file—all seven pages of it—was “currently and properly classified . . . in the interest of the national defense or foreign policy.”

Mark Winiarski, Washington bureau chief for the Reporter, appealed that ruling to the Justice Department, observing that it was “difficult to believe” that defense or foreign policy considerations should color the FBI's dealings with the Vatican, a city-state of the Catholic Church with which the U.S. government does not have diplomatic relations.

“On its face, the FBI decision and the logic proffered seem ludicrous,” Winiarski noted.

The Justice Department office that reviews appeals was adamant: the material “is not appropriate for discretionary release,” it responded.

Winiarski said he had no specific information in mind when he filed the request, which dealt with the period well before the election of Pope John Paul II or his visit to this country last year.

“We didn't know what we would find,” Winiarski said, “but we wanted to find out how the government talks to the Vatican and vice versa—what relation the U.S. government has with the Vatican state.”

Winiarski's imagination has been stirred because his request was rejected on both defense and foreign policy grounds. “My wildest speculations,” he said, “range from the possibility of the FBI wiretapping the Delegation [the residence and headquarters of the Vatican's official representative here] to the [possibility of] someone who was a spy, say, walking into the Delegation and giving himself up because his conscience got the better of him.”

Winiarski said the Reporter also would file a Freedom of Information request for a record of the CIA's contacts with the Vatican.

“The Vatican won't talk to us, the FBI won't talk to us, so we'll try the CIA before they slam that window shut,” Winiarski said.